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ABSTRACT

Since the earliest days of slavery until the Civil War, some form of education existed for blacks in the United States. Many slaveholders were motivated by religious beliefs to let their slaves learn to read, particularly the Bible. The most widespread educational effort for blacks in the 1700s was undertaken by a missionary branch of the Church of England. Other denominations also sent teachers to blacks, and after the Revolutionary War, Quakers and Methodists were especially active in blacks' education. In the early 1800s, many Southern States adopted laws forbidding education for blacks, but Protestant groups as well as free blacks and underground slave schools continued to encourage the teaching of blacks in spite of such laws. Frequently, white slaveholders or their wives or children would teach slaves to read, and occasionally blacks would learn from other interested whites or educated blacks. Given the alphabetic reading method used at the time, many students, black and white, never attained much reading ability. Reading was assessed by the quality of oral reading, and it was possible to read aloud and be quite incapable of comprehending. Still, although the extent of literacy among slaves is almost impossible to measure because it was kept secret, a number of blacks did learn to read, despite often adverse circumstances. (HTH)

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Southern Blacks: Accounts of Learning to Read Before 1861

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Southern Blacks: Accounts of Learning to Read

Before 1861

In the South between 1619, when the first Blacks arrived, and 1861 when the War Between the States began, a number of Blacks, slave and free, learned to read the alphabet, words and connected text. The purpose of this paper is to describe some of the circumstances under which Blacks learned to read and to give specific accounts of such attainment.

During the 1700s and 1800s, most if not all people were taught to read by the alphabetic method (Smith, 1965, pp. 31-35, 98-99). This method required the learner to spend long, arduous hours memorizing the alphabet, then columns of vowels, consonants, double letters, two-letter syllables called "easy" syllables (e.g., ba, be, bi, bo, bu) on up to six-syllable words--memorizing each page by saying it aloud forwards, backwards, up and down (see Figures 1 and 2). After memorizing letters and syllables, the learner read connected text, generally short religious sentences. Next, the learner read in a Primer and finally in the Bible (Smith, 1965, Chapter 2). Accurate oral reading, not the amount of understanding, was the yardstick measuring reading success. Many people just never made it to sentences, a Primer or the Bible. Study time was scarce because the amount of physical labor needed in everyday living left little time and energy to study. But, then, minimal reading ability was adequate for the needs of many people (Graff, 1979):

> "work did not often demand much literacy. . .recordkeeping, billing, inventorying and ordering all depended to some degree on the ability to write. Yet here the 'automatic responses' and 'rule of thumb technique' may well have played a more common role than higher, more advanced literacy skills" (p. 303).

If learning to read was such a time-consuming task for any learner, how did southern Blacks, most of whom were slaves, ever find the opportunity or have the energy to devote to developing reading ability?

Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here.

Early religiously motivated opportunities

From the earliest days of slavery, some form of education existed for Blacks. At first, as well as throughout the period before 1861, some Blacks received an education because some slaveholders were religiously motivated to let their slaves learn to read (Meade, 1857, p. 265; cf. Webber, 1978, p.44): How could Christians neglect instructing "heathens" in Christianity? For Protestants, personal salvation and spiritual enlightment were rooted in Bible reading (Mathews, 1966, p.19). Benjamin Fawcett of Virginia had such motivation when he told his slaves to read and study the Bible (Woodson, 1968, p. 81).

Besides religious convictions, many masters in the late 1600s thought it their patriarchal duty to provide their slaves with an

education. Some masters left money in their will for their slaves' education (Lockridge, 1974, p. 51). One such person was Richard Vaughn, a Virginian and slaveholder. Upon his death in 1654, Vaughn's will freed his slaves and directed that money be spent to teach them to to read; but not all slave owners felt this way (Meade, 1857, pp. 264-265). It was not until the 1700s, however, that more substantial efforts were undertaken to educate Blacks.

The most widespread educational effort for Blacks in the 1700s was undertaken by The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, a missionary arm of the state church, The Church of England. In 1701, Dr. Bray, an Anglican clergyman, founded the Society whose mission was taking the gospel to and establishing schools for Blacks and Indians. One such school was erected because Dr. Bray persuaded a French nobleman to donate 900 pounds to built it. Young children of Black slaves attended this school, learning to read the Bible (Pennington, 1939, pp. 4-6). Elsewhere, the Society sent out missionary-teachers. For example, Samuel Thomas, the first missionary- teacher in Goose Creek, South Carolina, taught 20 Blacks to read. These Blacks could "read the Bible distinctly"; that is, their oral reading was understandable.

The Society also promoted reading instruction of Blacks in Georgia, as evidenced by Dr. Bray's sending "three parcels of books: Bibles, primers, spelling books, horn-books (see Figure 1), testaments and psalters" to Savannah, Georgia (and also to Charleston, South Carolina) (Pennington, 1939, p.17). Since Blacks in Georgia were

scattered, the Rev. Bartholomew Zouberbuhler recommended to the Society that "an itinerent teacher be sent who could visit their several places of habitations. . .going from district to district, staying two or three months in each [as] the best way to teach the Negroes" (Pennington, 1939, p. 23). A Society catechist, Ottolenghi, reported in 1751 that he

> "had slaves with him three times a week in the evenings when their owners could spare them. He instructed those who were grown, advanced in years and. . . .found them willing and desirous to learn what they must do to be saved. . .promised to spare no pains to teach the younger ones to read" (Pennington, 1939, p. 21).

In colonial South Carolina, the Society established a school in Charleston run by Commissary Alexander Garden, another Anglican clergyman (Pennington, 1939). Garden's aim was to educate Blacks then send them out to be schoolteachers to other Blacks. In 1742, Garden began by buying two Black children (ages not given). Harry and Andrew did not know a letter of the alphabet; but after five months of daily instruction, the boys could read the New Testament "exceedingly well"; that is, with accurate oral reading (Pennington, 1939, p. 29). Harry and Andrew's achievement was extraordinary--even more so when the amount of memorization required by the alphabetic method is considered. During the next 20 years, the school annually turned out 30-40 young "ones capable of reading the Scriptures" (Pennington, 1939, p. 30). In 1746, for example, 55 children were taught during

the day and 15 grown slaves were taught during the evenings. Rev. Garden noted that the children's parents were very interested in their children's education. However, when Garden died, no successor could be found to run the school efficiently and it closed.

In North Carolina, the Society opened two schools for Blacks and Indians in 1731 (Dabney, 1936, p. 439). One school mistress was a white lady who had previously taught Indians. The Society supplied all the necessary books, which no doubt were the same ones that had been sent to Charleston. A high degree of literacy was achieved by at least one Black. A slave named Caesar authored a popular collection of poems that were published in North Carolina (Woodson, 1968, p. 87).

In Virginia, the Society found some resistance from slaveholders. The owners feared that converted Blacks would be automatically freed because baptism had meant freedom for the baptized Black (DuBois, 1939). The Bishop of London assured them that Blacks need not be freed and that a master had a duty to see that their slaves received instruction in Bible reading. Schoolmasters were urged by the Bishop to contribute part of their leisure time on Sundays to instruct Blacks (Meade, 1857, pp 264-265; Pennington, 1939, pp. 12, 14).

Three Society-run schools were opened in Virginia for Blacks. One school at Michaelmus had 24 scholars who were described as "progressing nicely" (Pennington, 1939, p. 47). In Hanover, the Society sent books to Mr. Boucher to encourage his instruction of Blacks. Mr. Boucher employed an educated, elderly Black to do the actual teaching. He personally instructed the elderly teacher two or three times a week

and examined those she taught. The 28-30 Blacks who attended learned reading and the principles of religion. Boucher also distributed many of the Society's books among the poor slaves and would try to find a grown slave who could read the instructions to the other slaves (Pennington, 1939, pp. 49-50). Finally, in Fredericksburg, Col. Lewis opened a school in 1765 which had 16 children ranging from eight to fifteen years of age. Since the childrens' masters were reluctant to let them attend, most of the children did not progress well; however, several left school "reading tolerably" (Pennington, 1939, p. 52).

Besides the Society's work, the Anglican church promoted another avenue for educating Blacks. Around 1727, the church took mulatto children without visible means of support and bound them out to churchmen who would teach them to read, write, and learn a trade. One such child was David James who was bound out to Mr. James Iscall to "teach him to read ye bible distinctly and also ye trade of gunsmith" (Russell, 1969, p. 138).

While the Anglican church dominated literacy instruction for Blacks, other denominations also sent out teachers to Blacks. In 1745, the Moravians sent Peter Boehler and George Schoeleus with a couple of grammars to convert Blacks of South Carolina (Monroe, 1911, p. 405; Pennington, 1939, p. 28). In 1716, Jesuits instructed "boarders and Negro women" in the French territories near Louisiana. In 1740, Hugh Bryan, a wealthy Presbyterian, opened another school in Charleston for Blacks (Bullock, 1967, p.12). The Quakers in 1743 established a school in North Carolina. A letter from the schoolmaster noted the need for more of Boston's Fox's Primmers

(Weeks, 1968, p.143). however, colonial Quaker schools in Virginia and North Carolina were closed when the authorities demanded an oath of allegiance from the Quaker teachers, who refused to do so on religious grounds (Woodson, 1968, pp. 45-48).

After the Revolutionary War, many more schools were operated by non-Anglican churches who, after 1776, were free to operate unrestrained by the Church of England. Quakers and Methodists were especially active in Blacks' education. In 1790, a Methodist conference decreed that free instruction should be given to Blacks on Sundays from 6-10 am. (Monroe, 1911, p. 405). In 1782, Robert Pleasants, a Quaker, opened a school for free Blacks in Gravelly Hills, Virginia. Pleasant's aim was ". . .[to] promote learning in common or useful literature, writing and to render so numerous a people fit for freedom and to become useful citizens" (Weeks, 1968, p. 215; Bullock,1967, p. 12). The school existed for only a few years. Another Quaker, Anthony Benezet, used his money to begin a public school for Black, mulatto and Indian children so they could learn to read, write and do arithmetic (Mott, 1837, p. 93). Benezet used his "own spelling books, primer and grammar, some of the first text-books published in America" (Woodson, 1968, p. 48). Other Quakers established a school in Alexandria, Virginia, where Benjamin Davis taught 180 pupils to

> "write legibly, read the Scriptures with tolerable facility. Eight others learned to read, but made little progress with writing. Among his less progressive students,

> fifteen could spell words of three or four syllables and read easy lessons, some had begun to write, while others were chiefly engaged in learning the alphabet and spelling monosyllables. . ." (Woodson, 1968, p. 109).

Two detailed accounts of individual Black's learning to read are available during the late 1700s: Lot Carey's and Jack's. In 1786, Lott Carey heard a sermon which inspired him to learn to read. Afterwards he obtained a Testament and "started learning his letters by trying to read a chapter" (Mott, 1837, p. 112). Carey also had some instruction from a young gentleman at the warehouse where he worked. "In a little time, Carey was able to read and write so as to make dray tickets [shipping orders]. . ." (Mott, 1837, p. 112). Later he attended night school, purchased his freedom and went to Africa as a missionary [1] (Simmons, 1968, p. 506).

Jack, a twelve year old (Mott, 1837, p. 134; see also Footnote 2), was going along a street and saw several school boys playing marbles. School books were piled nearby. Jack began looking through the books whereupon the white boys wanted to know why he was looking. Jack gave them some of his marbles if they would let him look. Jack got so curious about reading that he struck a bargain with the boys. For every letter the boys would teach him, he would give them a marble. Every day Jack won enough marbles to keep his lessons going. Then the white boy's parents found out. Jack's hands were "dirty" he was told. So, Jack offered to pay two marbles and wash his hands.

All was in vain. Finally Jack remembered that tombstones had letters on them and his "dirty" hands could not hurt the stone, so his reading lessons moved to the cemetary. Later on the white boy took Jack to Sunday School where he met a teacher who was overwhelmed by Jack's desire to read. The churchman found a teacher for Jack who taught him him two days a week. Jack was soon able to read and write (length of time not given). Jack possessed strong ambition to learn to read. Such ambition played a key role in many Blacks' gaining reading ability (Graff, 1979, p. 293; cf. T. Jones, 1857).

Obstacles develop blocking opportunities

In addition to obstacles any learner faced in learning to read (having the time and energy, getting a textbook, locating a teacher), Blacks had an additional obstacle: laws forbidding their being taught to read. In the early 1800s, many southern states adopted laws restricting the education of Blacks [3], primarily because the nature of the slave institution was changing, but also because slave insurrections involving as many as 6,000 to 9,000 slaves had occurred (Stoyer, 1898) With the advent of the industrial revolution, slaveholders viewed slaves as an economic necessity. Cotton production dramatically increased from an estimated 8,000 bales in 1790 to 650,000 bales in 1820. Enlightened slaves were not needed; working hands were [4]. Plantation owners believed educated slaves were undesirable property as such slaves were more likely to feel discontented with their lot--even more so if they read anti-slavery literature (Webber, 1978, pp.27-29). Indeed, three educated Blacks, Gabriel of Virginia, Denmark Vesey of South Carolina and Nat Turner,

led insurrections (Woodson, 1968, p. 156). Judge St. George Tucker (cited in Woodson, 1968, p. 159) concluded "Every year adds to the number of those who can read and write and the increase in knowledge is the principle agent in evoking the spirit we have to fear" (the spirit of discontent and insurrection). Thus, laws restricting Blacks learning to read were passed in hopes that one avenue inciting further unrest would be blocked and the cotton economy could progress undisturbed. To prevent educated Blacks from reading anti-slavery literature, Southern Congressmen even demanded that abolitionist literature be barred from the mails (N. Adams, 1969, p. 109).

Illicit efforts by organizations. Several Protestant denominations continued to encourage the teaching of Blacks in spite of laws against it in the 1800s. Methodists and Baptists in Georgia held that "all men should be taught to read [the Bible]. . .Baptists did much toward instructing free Negroes in Sabbath schools and privately" (Woodson, 1968, p. 119). The General Conference of Methodists in 1824 exhorted all masters to "teach their slaves to read the word of God" (Dabney, 1936, p. 439). After the Methodist church split into the northern and southern branches, the southern branch continued to spend money on Sabbath schools where "thousands of Negroes learned to read and write before 1864" (Dabney, 1936, p. 439). In one such Sabbath school Nat Turner received his education. Turner's books were "an ordinary speller, readers and the bible" (Woodson, 1968, p. 163).

In 1815, Quakers established a school which Blacks attended two days a week. Two years later "some of them [could] spell and some

[could] read" (Weeks, 1968, p. 231). Quakers decided to continue the school until "the males could read, write and cypher as far as the rule of three and those of the females to read and write" (Weeks, 1968, p. 231). Two other Quakers, Levi and Vestal Coffin, organized a Sunday school for Blacks in New Garden, North Carolina in 1821. Getting permission from the masters for some of their slaves to attend, the Coffins taught Blacks to "spell in words of two and three syllables" (Weeks, 1968, p. 232). At this point, the masters became fearful that the learning would bring discontent and possibly insurrection and forced the schools to close.

In one Sabbath School, Charles Parrish was taught by John Gillis to spell "in the blue-back speller" (Simmons, 1968, p. 1084; see also Figure 3). Another Sunday School teacher, Mrs. Margaret Douglas, taught her class to read with books donated by Christ Church in Norfolk (Dabney, 1936, p. 444). One literate Black preacher, Cooper London, approached Francis Kemble with a request for Bibles and prayer books. Evidently he needed them for reading with some of his congregation (Kemble, 1863, p. 134). Old Dinah learned to read from a mission station on Sundays. Her son, Daniel, soon "outran his teacher. . .learned to expound as well as read the Good Book, much to the edification of his colored friends. I taught this man his a, b, c's and now he knows so much. . ." (Murray, 1877, p. 17). Frederick Douglass (1962) opened his own Sabbath school to teach 20-30 of his fellow slaves to read.

Insert Figure 3 about here.

Schools instructing Blacks were not always church-run. In 1810, a group of free Blacks in Charleston, South Carolina, formed the Minor's Society to take care of orphan Black children and to give them instruction (Simmons, 1960, p. 1078; Woodson, 1968, pp. 117, 129). One of the pupils was Daniel Payne, who later became a bishop in the Methodist church (Simmons, 1968, p. 1078). Taught by Thomas Bonneau, Payne mastered the English branches, studied Roman and Greek history and mastered math through six books of Euclid. The feeling of tolerance towards Black education was not held by all in Charleston because in 1823, the Rev. Dougherty, who had established a school for Black children, was "pumped under the public fountain for doing so" (Knight, 1953, p. 467).

In Charleston, South Carolina, Bremer (1854) visited two Black schools:

> "One of these negro schools was for the children of free negroes. It was kept by a white school-master, and with open doors. I saw here an assembly of colored children in all shades. . .The schoolbooks were the same as those in use in the American schools for the white children" (p. 499).

After visiting the free school, Bremer went to a secret school for slaves. Finding the school proved difficult because of the laws forbidding its existence. "I found in a wretched dark hole only a half dozen poor children" (Bremer, 1854, p. 499). Besides these schools, Bremer was also told that two plantations, one in Florida and

one in Georgia, had schools for the slaves. In Fredericksburg, Virginia, when no school was available for his children to attend, Richard DeBaptiste made his own home into a school for his and his relatives' children. Their first teacher was a Black and the next a Scotch-Irishman (Drew, 1968, p. 352).

Illicit efforts by individuals. If a Black lived in a city (Graff, 1979, pp. 310-311), chances were better for learning at a secret school, from other educated Blacks, from Sabbath schools or from a school for free Blacks, such as in Charleston. If a Black were a house servant, especially a young Black who was with white children, chances of learning were greater. A few Blacks living on plantations were taught by masters who defied the law, by other slaves who could read, or by passers-by. Every now and then an underground school sprung up where a Black would go in secret to learn. But on the whole, most Blacks simply had no opportunity at all to gain any reading ability.

White children were a frequent source of instruction (Webber, 1978, p.131) "Masters who had children known to be teaching slaves protected their. . .sons and daughters from the rigors of the law" (N. Adams, 1969, pp. 56-57). Fredericka Bremer (1854), a traveller and writer in the South, reported in the spring of 1850 that in Savannah, Georgia,

> "The daughters themselves instruct the little Negro children on their father's estate and praised very much their facility in learning, in particular they seemed to have

pleasure in pictures and stories and easily understood them . . . But I [Bremer] feel too few embrace it" (p. 355).

Sarah Grimke, Susan Smedes and Letitia Burwell were three daughters who recorded in detail how they taught house servants to read. Sarah Grimke, who had taught a Black Bible class every Sunday afternoon, felt compelled to teach her students to read so that they could read God's Word first hand (Lerner, 1967, pp 22-23). Although her father was a South Carolina judge, and Sarah had read for herself the 1740 law that forbade the teaching of reading to Blacks, she still went ahead and taught her waiting-maid to read. Sarah and the maid would play school at night while the maid was brushing Sarah's hair. Afterwards the girls put the light out, screened the keyhole and "flat on our stomachs before the fire, with the spelling book under our eyes, we defied the laws of South Carolina" (p. 23).

Susan Smedes, a twelve year old Mississippi plantation girl, taught the houseservants (Smedes, 1888, p. 79); and to prove how well her pupils were progressing, Smedes invited her whole family to hear her students recite poetry. "She had about a dozen maids, old and young. . .one guest was quite astonished to see his own servant. . .get up and recite a piece of poetry that he had learned with pains for the occasion (p. 79).

Finally, Letitia Burwell in Virginia told how she and her sister taught Blacks to read:

"As soon as my sister and myself had learned to read and cipher, we were inspired with a desire to teach the negroes

> who were about the house and kitchen...our regular system was every night to place chairs around the dining table, ring a bell, open school, she presiding at one end of the table and I at the other, each propped up on books to give us the necessary height and dignity for teachers. Our school proved successful. . .All who tried, learned to read and from that day we never ceased to teach all who desired to learn" (Burwell, 1895, p. 22).

Several other accounts exist of white children teaching Blacks with whom they had contact. Dan Josiah Lockhart learned to read from white children (Drew, 1968, p. 45). Lockhart would take his spelling book down in a hollow where white children instructed him. Later he attended a church in Virginia where other white children continued his reading instruction (Drew, 1968, p. 45). White children taught James Sumler of Norfolk, Virginia to read in the hayloft on Sundays. Sumler then bought a book with a ninepence that a man had given him for holding his horse (Drew, 1968, p. 97). Parsons (1969), a traveller-reporter, found that children of white clergymen were encouraged to instruct young slaves and it was winked at as an indulgence of the clerical office. Uncle Cephas was taught to read by white children also. "The white children taught him on the sly when they came into the kitchen to see Dinah, who was a very good cook. He was never without books during his stay with his master" (Woodson, 1968, (p. 213). Finally, Frederick Douglass was taught to read the Bible by his young mistress (Johnson, 1969, pp. 86-87). Douglass learned to write

by copying from his master's writing book. Later on, Douglass managed to buy the Columbian Orator for a reading book.

Some Blacks were fortunate to have "built-in" teachers--the white children with whom they served or went to church. Other Blacks, however, received reading lessons only after bribing white children or after going to considerable lengths to find a teacher. Redpath, a travelling newsman, interviewed a slave who had obtained spelling books three different times; but each time his mistress found out and burned them. Undaunted, this slave finally learned the alphabet because he bribed some school boys with "nuts and things to teach me. . . there's a schoolhouse. The well is close by and when I used to go for water I got the boys to teach me a letter at a time" (Redpath, 1859, p. 161). Edmund Kelly, a slave of a primary schoolmaster, also resorted to bribes because his master would not teach him reading. Kelly took "advantage of the little children who came to the house to attend the school and for a speller and a few lessons he gave the scholars bon-bons from his master's table" (Simmons, 1968, p. 291).

Another resource for Blacks wanting to learn to read was a master or mistress.

> "These are generally owned by wealthy slaveholders who have them taught in spite of the laws forbidding it when it will better serve their own interest and convenience. . .they want servants to go to the market to transact business, to pass letters and to write simple simple directions and add small sums" (Parsons, 1969, p. 249).

An example of such a slaveholder was a Southern member of Congress

wanted his servants to read "if for no other reason that they might know the titles of books, super-inscriptions of letters and other things in performing errands or receiving written orders" (N. Adams, 1969, pp. 56-57). Bremer found many plantation owners in 1850 who frequently taught their slaves to read in their own homes (Bremer, 1854, p. 276): William McAlpine picked up reading from the mistress of the plantation who had been educated in the North (Simmons, 1968, p. 524), J. Morris of North Carolina was taught to read by his white father-master (Woodson, 1968, p. 208), and Ephraim Waterford of Virginia was bound out by his master to a man who would teach him to read (Woodson, 1968, p. 214).

Besides masters and mistresses teaching Blacks to read, white businessmen also taught Blacks. Redpath told of a Black in Augusta, Georgia, who learned to write from the young white mechanic with whom he worked (Redpath, 1859, p. 161). Henry McNeal Turner had his education furthered by the lawyers who employed him. The lawyers were amazed at Turner's memory and at night "taught him in defiance of State laws forbidding it, to read accurately history, theology, and even works of law. [They] also taught me arithmetic, geography, astronomy and anything else I desired to know" (Simmons, 1968, pp. 807-809). A stewardess on a Mississippi riverboat studied a large alphabet with the help of a white steward, her employer (Bremer, 1854, p. 194). Aleck, a waiter, was promised reading lessons by Kemble (Kemble, 1863, p. 230). Dr. Alexander Augusta of Virginia "learned to read while serving white men as a barber" (Woodson, 1968, p. 210).

Finally, James Poindexter attended a school in Richmond where he was instructed in the common branches until he was ten years old. Afterwards, he was an apprentice to a barber and learned from the customers (Simmons, 1968, p. 394).

Sometimes Blacks received instruction in reading from other interested whites. After H. M. Turner got a spelling book, an old white lady and a white boy with whom he played "taught him the alphabet and how to spell as far as two syllables" (Simmons, 1968, p. 808). Later Turner's mother hired another white lady to give him lessons every Sunday; however, this lady quit when the neighbors complained. Turner continued through Webster's Spelling Book (see Figure 3) on his own. G. W. Gayles of Mississippi learned the alphabet from Miss Elizabeth Powell of New York, who had been hired to teach the white children. Evidently, Gayles learned to read as he could read the Bible, hymn book and other books (Simmons, 1968, p. 594). W. S. Scarborough of Georgia continued his education by taking "regular lessons in writing from an old South Carolinian" (Simmons, 1968, p. 411). Rev. Northcross met a white man who promised to teach him to read. "I secured a blueback speller [Webster's] and went to the mountain every Sunday. . .to be taught. . .I continued this way for a year and succeeded very well (Northcross, 1972, p.300).

White neighbors were responsible for John Chavis' obtaining an education. Chavis' neighbors saw that he got an early education and then sent him to Princeton to "see if a Negro would take a college education" (Woodson, 1968, p. 116). He graduated and was a good Latin and a fair Greek scholar. After being prohibited from preaching, he

opened a classical school for white persons since any instruction to Blacks was outlawed. The "best people in the community patronized the school" (Woodson, 1968, 117; Knight, 1952, 471). Chavis' students were described as scholarly and polite.

When the occasion arose, some Blacks learned to read from other educated Blacks. W. B. Weaver was "taught by his oldest brother under a cart shelter" (Richings, 1900). Henry Banks "learned to read from my brother-in-law, but. . .not write (Simmons, 1968, p. 72). Benedict Duncan's father taught him his letters, his Sunday School teacher took him through a spelling book and his father helped him learn to read other books (Simmons, 1968, p. 110). "A colored man who came from Ohio and opened a school" taught Thomas Hegebeth (Simmons, 1968, p. 276). Letitia Burwell recalled that on the plantation where she had grown up there was a Bible in every cabin. One of the Blacks on the plantation opened a night school to teach others at twenty-five cents a week, but few came (Burwell, 1895, p. 3). On the Smedes plantation, a Black named Virginius, who could read, taught many Blacks to read:

> "Five of them learned to read so well that they became preachers. For this service, Virginius got one dozen eggs a month. . .he taught in the kitchen by the light of pine torches. . .One of his graduates asked his advice as to a course of reading, suggesting history as a branch he wished to pursue. The youthful teacher properly advised Robinson Crusoe. . .after reading 100 pages, Joe came to him and [asked if the book were really history]. Virginius

explained that it was fiction, whereupon Joe said [he thought it wasn't true]" (Smedes, 1888, p. 80).

On another plantation, Blacks learned to read from a literate Black, using religious books and novels (Graff, 1979, p. 196) bought from peddlers (Knight, 1953, p. 503). J. E. Jones was taught by a literate Black who was hired by Jones' mother to teach him to read. Jones was instructed several nights a week secretly. When the master found out, he sold the literate slave (Simmons, 1968, p. 235). Christopher Payne of Virginia was taught by his mother who "had the rudiments of an English education at the hands of her old master and father" (Simmons, 1968, p. 368).

* * *

Some Blacks did have opportunities to learn elements of reading in the 1700s and 1800s; but given the reading method at the time, the alphabetic method, many American students, Black or white, never attained much reading ability. Students in general may have only learned the alphabet letter names, or gone as far as one-syllable blending (e.g., bi, bo, bu). If a student made it through a Primer, some words would have been memorized. Most students in the South and the North simply had a very limited sight vocabulary.

Reading was assessed by the quality of oral reading a student produced. Prosodic features (pitch, stress, juncture) were the yardstick for measuring success in reading. It is quite possible for a student to have been excellent in word calling, and still have been

quite incapable of comprehension (Graff, 1979, p. 273; N. Smith, 1965, Chapter 2). Therefore, statements of any students' reading ability need to be cautiously weighed.

Throughout this paper no estimates have been given as to how many Blacks in the South possessed reading ability. Cornelius (1983), after analyzing personal interviews of ex-slaves [6], has concluded that "the extent of literacy among slaves is almost impossible to measure" (p. 173). Why? Because slaves who were known to be readers were often sold and sometimes received terrible punishment for reading (i.e., whippings, branding, dismemberment, Harris, 1972, pp.95-96). Therefore, even if a slave could read, s/he often hid that talent except from his or her closest intimates.

Despite often adverse circumstances, a number of Blacks in the South before 1861 did indeed learn to read. Early opportunities for Blacks' learning to read were primarily religiously motivated and were more openly given, generally by Protestant churches. However, in the early 1800s, several large slave insurrections occurred about the same time that cotton production greatly increased. Increased production demanded a large, stable work force. One avenue to keep the work force settled was to pass laws forbidding Blacks' learning to read, thus preventing their reading abolitionist literature or parts of the Bible not in line with "slaves [being] faithful, obediant and content" (Webber, 1978, pp. 54-55). Such laws in the South pushed most Blacks' learning to read underground--and there it remained until the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter.

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Footnotes

[1] From Bremer's interviews (1854, p. 351), some southern whites advocated Blacks' education only with the understanding that those educated Blacks would go to Liberia.

[2] Mott's (1837) report is originally from the New York Observer, 1790.

[3] Monroe, 1911, pp. 406-409): Virginia in 1819 prohibited "all meetings of slaves, free persons of color in any night, day, or any school for teaching them to read and write"; (2) Georgia in 1829 forbade "any person of color from obtaining instruction of any sort from any source"; (3) Louisiana in 1830 forbade free Blacks from entering the state and "persons of color from being taught"; (4) North Carolina in 1835 "abolished the schools for free persons of color and enacted a law that no descendants of negro parents to the fourth generation should enjoy the benefits of the public school system"; and (5) "Mississippi had similar laws."

[4] Woodson (1968, pp. 83-84) examined advertising bills at slave auctions to confirm that uneducated slaves were considered the most valuable.

[5] Several catechisms were written specifically for such instruction (Jones, 1969, pp. 68-80): (1) Rev. Mines of Leesburg, Virginia, wrote "The Evangelical Catechism or A Plain easy system of the principles, doctrines and duties of the Christian Religion", 1822; (2) Dr. W. Capers of Charleston, South Carolina, wrote "A Short Catechism for the use of colored members on trial of the M. E. Church in

South Carolina," 1832; (3) Rev. Samuel Bryan, a Methodist missionary on the Savannah River, wrote "A Plain and Easy Catechism: Designed for the benefit of colored children with several verses and hymns in the appendix," 1833; and (4) C. C. Jones wrote "Catechism for colored persons," 1837.

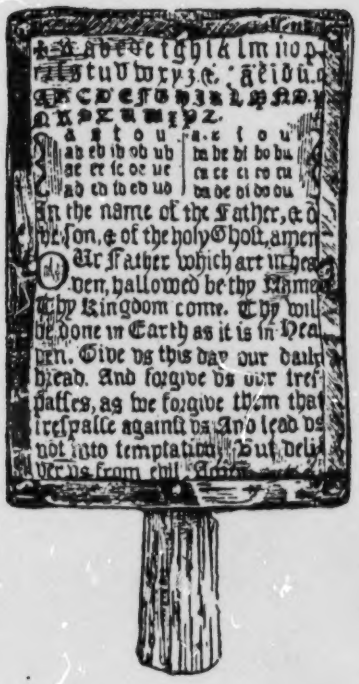
[6] Cornelius (1983) studied 3,428 interviews of ex-slaves questioned by the Federal Writers Project.

Figure Captions

Figure 1. The hornbook gave children their first reading instruction in school.

Figure 2. In The New England Primer the child started off with columns of two syllables.

Figure 3. Webster's Blue-back Speller provided reading lessons that aimed at moral instruction.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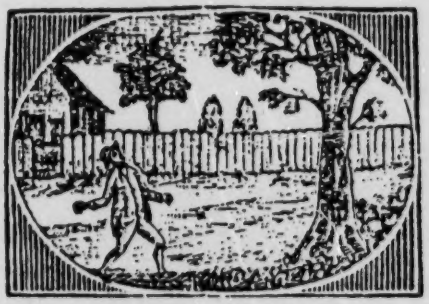
ba be bi bo bu
ca ce ci co cu
da de di do du
In the name of the Father, & o
ſon, & of the holy Ghoſt, amen
Our Father which art in hea
ven, hallowed be thy Name
thy Kingdom come. Thy wil
be done in Earth as it is in Hea
ven. Give vs this day our dail
bread. And forgive vs our treſ
paſſes, as we forgive them that
treſpaſſe againſt vs. And lead vs
not into temptation. But deli
uer vs from evil. Amen.

EASY SYLLABLES FOR CHILDREN.

Ab	eb	ib	ob	ub
ac	ec	ic	oc	uc
ad	ed	id	od	ud
af	ef	if	of	uf
ag	eg	ig	og	ug
aj	ej	ij	oj	uj
al	el	il	ol	ul
am	em	im	om	um
an	en	in	on	un
ap	ep	ip	op	up
ar	er	ir	or	ur
as	es	is	os	us
at	et	it	ot	ut
av	ev	iv	ov	uv
ax	ex	ix	ox	ux
az	ez	iz	oz	uz



FABLE I. *Of the Boy that ſtole Apples.*

AN old Man found a rude Boy upon one of his trees ſtealing Apples, and deſired him to come down; but the young Sauce-box told him plainly he wou'd not. Won't you? ſaid the old Man, then I will fetch you down; ſo he pulled up ſome tufts of Graſs, and threw at him; but this only made the Youngſter laugh, to think the old Man ſhould pretend to beat him out of the tree with graſs only.

Well, well, ſaid the old Man, if neither words nor graſs, will do, I muſt try what virtue there is in Stones; ſo the old Man pelted him heartily with ſtones; which ſoon made the young Chap haſten down from the tree and beg the old Man's pardon.

MORAL.

If good words and gentle means will not reclaim the wicked, they muſt be dealt with in a more ſevere manner.